

The Master Key

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By JOHN FLEMING WILSON

CHAPTER XXV.

The Escape of Ruth.

AFTER his experience in rescuing John Dorr from the hands of the outraged priests of Bhala, Sir Donald Faversham prepared to start the new day. He could not well realize just what had happened in the twenty-four hours that had just ended. It needed the commonplace details of a morning's toilet to make things seem actual.

And what facts they were that changed his whole future!

Ruth had promised to marry him! Faversham belonged to that great class of Englishmen who unite the virtues of careful training with an adaptability to circumstance which has made Great Britain the colonizer of the world.

He was as formal in many ways as a clock. In others he could amaze the most impulsive and impressionable adventurer.

When he first met Ruth he had had not the faintest notion of wooing her. His admiration had been frank and unreserved, but without any underlying depth of feeling.

His volunteering to join John Dorr and Ruth in this wild search for the missing idol had been what he called a lark.

It was only long association with her, the constant view of her pretty innocence and an occasional glimpse of her profounder and womanly nature that had touched his heart and awakened in him feelings that he had refrained from confessing to himself.

Then came the moment when she had turned to him for help and he had been the single person in the world who could save John Dorr.

Sharp and brief as had been the struggle in his own mind, it had brought him to an acknowledgment of the fact that she was the only woman he wanted for his wife.

On the very tick of her hour of trouble he had ventured to ask his reward for service.

She had promised, and now he, baronet and retired officer of the British army, shook like a boy at the thought of the happiness that awaited him.

They met at breakfast. Dorr still showing the effects of his night's adventures, Ruth bright-eyed from want of sleep and Sir Donald alone presenting the appearance of one who had begun the day aright after a sound night's rest.

Their natural topic of conversation was of Dorr's attempt to capture the idol and Sir Donald's rescue of him.

John could give little satisfaction to Ruth's minute inquiries, and the Englishman confessed that he himself, though much more familiar with the native ways and native tempers, had not much notion of exactly how it had all come about nor how he had found Dorr and extricated him.

"The only thing I gather from it all is this," he said amiably. "You had better take my advice in this country and not try to perform any of your western feats. India is a very odd country, and they resent here anything that doesn't follow the good old lines."

"I suppose I was very foolish," John confessed ruefully. "But when I saw that image right within reach I simply couldn't resist the temptation to grab it and try to escape."

Sir Donald looked at Ruth meaningfully. "I can't say that I'm a bit sorry, old chap," he told Dorr. "After all, as you say, it's an ill wind that blows no one any good."

Instantly Ruth caught his meaning, and her eyes fell. Yes, she had promised, and this brave gentleman who had risked his life for her sake should not be without his reward.

But—she stared miserably at her plate until John rallied her and swore that he would get her the plans.

"And here comes the fellow who will tell us what really did happen," Sir

Donald himself seemed to lose a little of his aplomb.

Finally they saw him nod curtly to the native, who squatted down on the pavement. A moment later he had rejoined them. His usually placid face bore an expression of anxiety.

"What can be the matter?" demanded Ruth.

"Not anything for you to worry about," replied Faversham. "I'm sure I can arrange everything presently, but you certainly stirred up the priests, Dorr."

"Well, what do they intend to do?" inquired John, undisturbed, except that he did not understand a glance exchanged by Ruth and Sir Donald.

"It seems they have started a kind of holy war against us," the baronet answered grimly. "You desecrated their idols and they've excited a lot of the people against you and—"

"And what?" demanded John impatiently.

With a meaning look toward Ruth, Sir Donald faced Dorr. "This is not a place for Miss Gallon," he said formally.

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we do?"

"I am going to put you in charge of my old servant Achmet," he told her. "I trust him, and he will see you safe. Dorr and I shall have to go a separate way."

By this time the mob had filled the street without and was yelling for vengeance on the sacrilegious white men, punctuating its demands with an occasional stone against the wall.

Achmet bowed low before Ruth and with a gesture indicated that she was to follow him. She hesitated.

Sir Donald curtly said, "Hurry!" She impulsively turned to John, and he saw her eyes filled with anxiety for him. That satisfied his wounded heart, and he urged her on.

When she had disappeared in the wake of the hastening servant Sir Donald glanced at Dorr and then said abruptly: "Come ahead! We'll try a back way out."

"We shan't interfere with Ruth's getting away, shall we?" John responded.

There was a glimmer of admiration in Faversham's eyes as he shook his head.

"No, Achmet will take her his own way. We go an entirely different one—if we escape the mob."

He had hardly spoken when the outer gate swung inward and there was a wild crush of struggling bodies between the high pillars. A stone struck the floor between the two Europeans.

"Come with me," said Faversham and drew Dorr around a corner and then inside a small entry. Another entry giving off this offered escape and they darted down it. An instant later they were in an empty courtyard.

"I know where I am now," Faversham said coolly and opened a gate in the opposite wall which led into a garden. Five minutes later the two men were strolling along a quiet lane out of sight and sound of the mob.

"They will destroy all our things," Dorr suggested.

"No. The hotelkeeper and the police will see to it that they don't. All they wanted was you and me. Failing to catch us, they will disperse."

"But where shall we find Ruth?" John went on eagerly.

"Achmet will take her to a camp of beggars outside the city," he answered.

"But how? She won't be safe with only a native."

"Safer than with a regiment of soldiers," was the response. "I know where the place is. Let's go to it. I guarantee that we shall find Miss Gallon safe and sound. I know Achmet of old. He is specially trustworthy because he is a Mohammedan and he doesn't respect idols any more than you and I do."

They finally reached the camp up the bank of the river and Achmet saluted before them.

"Where is the maiden?" demanded Faversham.

The servant rose and took the covering of a large basket. Ruth smiled up at them.

"I heard your voices," she said, laughing. "Achmet thought I ought to get out right away, but I wanted to surprise you."

"And that is the way you got out of the hotel?" demanded John.

"Yes, Achmet tucked me into this basket and carried me right through all those terrible people."

"What is to be done now?" John demanded presently.

"I'll have Achmet get our belongings," said Faversham. "This gang here is his, he says. We can't do better than stick with them for awhile. I believe they are going up into the hills anyway. So much the better for us. Bhala is no spot for you and me just now."

"But the idol and the plans?" protested John. "We know where it is today. Tomorrow it may be a hundred miles away or hidden past our ever finding it!"

"That is true," said Sir Donald. "But the safety of Miss Gallon is paramount. I will do what I can. Possibly I'll be able to do more than you think."

With this Dorr had to be content, but later when he and Ruth were alone he brought the subject up again.

To his amazement, Ruth seemed little interested and her manner was an odd mixture of reserve and timidity.

Gone was the old frankness and intimacy.

At last John said quietly, "I hope you don't think I was wholly careless of your safety last night. My only object was to get back your papers."

And Ruth, with Sir Donald's flushed face before her eyes and his voice in her ears, remembered her promise and was silent.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Wilkerson Again on the Trail.

IT had not been difficult for Harry Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell to trace Faversham and his party from the time they landed to their arrival in Bhala. But the idol itself, the object of their quest, still concealed its whereabouts in spite of the most minute inquiries.

"We'll simply have to watch Dorr," Wilkerson said at last. "We know he is on the trail, and we'll just follow him. Sooner or later we'll catch him."

Jean Darnell sullenly agreed, but privately confided to Drake that she thought Wilkerson had lost his nerve.

The climate did not suit her, nor the food, nor the primitive modes of travel, and her temper grew worse and worse. Drake promised to do some investigating on his own hook. He was once more completely under the woman's domination, and he dreamed of finding the precious papers himself and so putting Wilkerson out of the running.

Strangely enough, the man, weakly vicious as he was, was possessed by an honest and whole-souled love for Jean.

She knew this, and at times her tawny eyes rested on him with unmistakable affection, but she knew perfectly well that she would choose Wilkerson provided he made good by gaining the master key and uncovering the wealth of the great mountain idol.

It was Drake who brought the news of the riot in the temple and the outcome of Dorr's attempt to steal the idol.

"He was disguised and thought he could get away with it," he went on. "But the priests were too quick for him."

Wilkerson's shifty eyes narrowed. "I'll get that idol!" he boasted.

"I forgot to tell you that the idol isn't there any longer," Drake continued. "From what I could learn the temple wasn't considered a safe place for it, and it's disappeared."

"Where to?" demanded Wilkerson.

"That I couldn't find out. It was rather risky asking too much anyway."

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The three of them started forth under a glimmering moon toward the priests' camp, a mile or so away by a spring.

Half an hour's steady tramping brought them within eyeshot of the place, and Wilkerson went ahead to spy out the lay of things.

When he came back he roughly told Drake, in reply to his question, that the idol must be in one of the pack sacks lying about.

"It's a case of sneak up and get a sack each of us and then look for the idol in it," he said.

"All right," Drake growled. "But it's risky business. In case of a muss where'll we meet again?"

"At our own camp," Wilkerson whispered and led the way.

When they came close to the spot where the natives were asleep the three of them paused and listened.

Presently Wilkerson gave a silent signal that no one was awake, and they crept up among the baggage.

The first two sacks yielded nothing and Wilkerson was reaching out for one that seemed bulkier than the rest when their guide coughed and instantly a couple of the priests awakened.

Seeing strangers, they gave an alarm, and one, apparently a soldier, fired off an ancient musket so close to Drake that he incontinently dropped his burden and fled.

He heard Wilkerson cursing behind him, a couple of more shots and then took to his heels in good earnest as he heard rapid footsteps.

A moment later Wilkerson had caught up to him, panting and dragging the sack, which he had refused to surrender.

Between them they carried it on further and then rested in a slight hollow till their guide came up.

"If the idol isn't in this sack," Wilkerson said with a snarl, "I'll go back and shoot up the whole outfit and get it."

When the things were cut and the great bag opened the first object that met their eyes was the image they sought, glimmering in the half light.

The moment he saw it and knew that his quest was ended Wilkerson flung the rest of the stuff away and boldly got to his feet.

"Now for our own camp. We'll just see where those plans are," he growled.

Drake and the guide both protested in vain.

Safely away from pursuit, they lit a light and examined their find.

"It's the same one," Wilkerson said triumphantly.

"Made of metal, too," said Drake slowly. "Now, where are the plans?"

"Inside of it!" announced his companion, beating on the idol with his knuckles. "Now to find out the opening."

It did not take long for him to discover the movable eye, and when he had pulled that out he thrust his finger in and withdrew it with a folded paper.

"Safe and sound," he exulted, dropping the image to the ground, where

Equipped at last, they started forth and for two days kept pretty closely to the river, which wound about through the hills, mounting slowly to its source in the mountains.

Several times they heard of Faversham and Dorr, but Wilkerson refused to turn aside or delay once on the trail of the idol. And at last they came within view of the little cavalcade which was escorting the god to a place of safety.

Vile as were the men he had hired, Wilkerson dared not trust them too far. He knew that they were superstitious, and he feared that when it came to a battle between avarice and the terror of the supernatural he would be left in the lurch.

So he warned Drake not to appear too anxious and by no means to let their followers know that they intended to seize the image and take it away with them.

"But if the papers are in that idol," Drake protested, "we ought to be able to get them and replace the old image, with nobody a jot the worse."

"That may be possible," was the response. "On the other hand, the plans may be concealed so that it will take time to find them."

They discussed a dozen plans and finally decided that the next night the two of them, accompanied only by their guide, should make the trial.

But supposing they have the image, where shall we find it?" questioned Drake. "They have a lot of stuff in their packs, and you may be sure they have concealed the idol well. Unless they feared its being stolen again they wouldn't be going to all this pains."

"We'll find it all right," was Wilkerson's sole response.

The evening came when they were to put their scheme to the test. Their own little company made camp and after supper gradually went to sleep.

It was 10 o'clock when Wilkerson nodded to Drake, and they quit their places by the dying fire.

Outside of the circle they met the man who was to guide them, and one glance at his brutal face showed Wilkerson that he was once more confronted with a problem.

The man made no bones of demanding a large extra sum in compensation for his risks and intimating with extreme plainness that in case his exorbitant blackmail was not paid he would not only not accompany them, but put it out of their power to go alone.

For an hour Wilkerson bargained and haggled, but all to no purpose. At

last he gave in and practically stripped himself of robe, which the other pocketed without a thank you.

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